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AUTHOR Anderson, Edward
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents background information on the development of the folk oral tradition of black American literature. It then examines seven types of black literature that are basically oral: black folk tales, black folk sermons, black ballads, black American spirituals, black nonreligious or secular songs, black American blues, and Afro-American jokes. Such verbal and rhetorical strategies of the black ghetto as rapping, running it down, jiving, shucking, copping a plea, sounding, and signifying are discussed, and it is noted that these verbal strategies are parts of the black oral tradition and serve definite needs and functions in the black American community. The final part of the paper indicates ways in which teachers of English composition may employ the folk oral types of black American literature and the black verbal and rhetorical strategies as motivational and instructional tools in the classroom. (GW)

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THE USE OF THE BLACK FOLK ORAL TRADITION AND OTHER BLACK RHETORICAL AND VERBAL STRATEGIES IN THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION

by Edward Anderson
John Tyler Community College

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THE USE OF THE BLACK FOLK ORAL TRADITION AND OTHER BLACK RHETORICAL AND VERBAL STRATEGIES IN THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION

by Edward Anderson

When black people were first brought from the West Coast of Africa to American soil, they were brought from diverse places and they shared common cultural patterns which were rich in tradition and folklore. Much of the transplanted African culture found expression in oral literature, music, and dance. Basically, West Africa is the true home of most American blacks, but some did originate from East and South Africa; hence, they were brought from areas where many dialects were spoken. Yet their lack of a common language (until they could learn to use some form of English on their American plantations) as well as their fate as slaves did not keep them from expressing their emotions, sensations, rhythm, and imagination. They revealed their African literary heritage through a native gift to produce folk literature such as poetry, rhythmical songs, wise sayings, and oral folk stories through a use of vivid imagery, figurative and metapherical language, double-edged vocabulary and sentence structure. Therefore, the unique folk oral tradition of black American literature includes those literary types that are basically oral, such as black folk tales, black folk-songs (i.e., spirituals, blues, ballads), black sermons, black jokes; and black verbal and rhetorical strategies, such as shucking, jiving, running it down, signifying, sounding, copping a plea and rapping. Of the three traditions of black American literature, the Folk Tradition, the Abolitionist Tradition,

and the Plantation Tradition, the black American Folk oral literary, verbal and rhetorical Tradition is the outstanding example of one of America's most vital and oldest language heritages.

These literary and rhetorical types of the Folk oral Tradition show direct expression of the black American experience from American colonial days to the present; they, hence, show many aspects of the human condition of all mankind, many aspects of the universal appeal of all mankind, and the universal appeal of literature and rhetoric of all peoples of the world though expressing these aspects in different and outstandingly unique ways. The black Folk oral Tradition gives more evidence of what it means to be "black" in America more fully than do the black written forms. The black American man has been given more credit and recognition for the uniqueness of the Folk oral Tradition.

Almost all racial and ethnical groups of people have produced anonymous music and literature. These folk musical and literary forms are usually produced spontaneously and handed down orally from one generation to the next. Hence, in the transitional stage, the literature or music may gain or lose parts of its content or substance. These anonymous productions or artifacts may vary from place to place. Many versions of a particular incident (or oral story or literary form) may arise about the same time in various neighboring localities and clans. Lack of written literary forms result in different versions of a particular incident, story, or literary form. Thus, black folk literature had its origins in the same process and sprang basically from African and black American folklore, legends, customs, and traditions. When such folk materials were recorded, they were then preserved, thus preventing change.

Although it is worth mentioning the importance of some outstanding Folk Tradition writers---Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles Chesnutt, James Baldwin, Sterling Brown, Ralph Ellison, Margaret Walker, James Weldon Johnson, and Don Lee, it is worth taking note of Houston Baker's assertion that "to mention other black writers who have employed aspects of the black folklore tradition would be to mention almost every writer in the black American literary tradition."[1]

Making use of this Black American Folk Oral Tradition in the classroom can do much to change negative attitudes about its producers and about those who are presented in the literature. At the same time, its use can more importantly serve as wholesome instructional materials and aids in the teaching of English composition. It is important that teachers of English composition be made aware of the certain facts about the black Folk tradition and be made aware of the variety of curriculum materials that treat the tradition in order that they may adequately use these materials in their English composition classes.

Black speech and black language have a very wide blackground. Beginning with the colonial period of American Negro slavery, black Africans in America lived closely with white Americans and, hence, adopted some European forms and revised them into totally unique expressions. White masters found acceptable the many black American slave secret meanings which the slaves applied to the original white forms. Black Americans' songs and poetry, folk tales,, literary, verbal and rhetorical forms had double, hidden and some not so hidden meanings, The black American

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[1] Houston A. Baker, Jr., Black Literature in America (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1971), p. 20.

Folk oral tradition also shows the black Americans' great ability to openly relax and to enjoy themselves and, hence, to show their spontaneity in most of their oral language productions--chanting, clapping, hands, swaying to the rhythm and grunting to provide rhythm which is called the songified pattern. This is shown in all forms and types of the black American folk oral tradition. Irony and repetition are the central stylistic devices of the folk oral tradition types and are more effective when they are sung or heard than when they are written and then read silently.

The importation of black men from African to American soil, their later enslavement, and finally their isolation from the dominant culture (geographically and socially during American Negro slavery and after emancipation) forced them to develop and to make use of a common linguistic system (a black American dialect) as well as to express themselves in literary, verbal and rhetorical art through a black American Folk oral Tradition which met their social, psychological, religious, educational, and entertainment needs. Many of the black American folk oral productions of the black culture were not written down until the 19th century and even on into the 20th century and some forms still are not written down but are spoken and altered in our present day society.

The language stylistic part of the black American English dialect found in the black folk oral tradition came about as a psycho-cultural process that supported and nourished black speech during American Negro slavery days. Black Americans devised a system of communication that could not be deciphered by the white master. Since they could not use

their West African dialects, the black Americans developed a language that had one meaning for the white slave master and one meaning for the black African slave with a linguistic (i.e., grammar and pronunciation) "code" and with a completely different stylistic part full of ambiguity, paradox and irony. The black language was presented in the immedicate linguistic context or dialect as well as in the context of Negro enslavement in America. Hence, because of the black Americans' experiences and the history of oppression under which the black speech survived, the black dialect with the black stylistic forms is the language of not just the black American ghetto, but the language of Black America. It is the black-based communication system that is, derived from the white slave-master--words which are Euro-American and the meanings, nuances, and tone which are Afro-American. This language of the black Folk oral tradition is found in the socio-psychological aspects of black Americans, (i.e., the non-verbal cues, such as postures, gestures, of the hands and the head, facial expressions, and eye and body movements).

It is worth noting that many vocabulary words found in the black folk oral tradition result from a reversal process--whatever the words mean in White America, they take the opposite meanings in Black America. These vocabulary words were first used as tools of a "coded" language with figurative usage and rhetorical power and served functionally for survival reasons. Among many black Americans the "code" has, hence, become the usual innovative ways of expressing ordinary events. These black vocabulary words are simply English terms which are made to serve the cultural needs of black people who can identify with these words because they are parts of the black <u>American</u> experience.

The black stylistic part of the black American folk oral tradition can be classified into the sacred and the secular types of oral expresion. The sacred style is rural and Southern. It is fixed in the black religious experience (i.e., black spirituals) and the black church tradition. The secular style is urban and Northern, but it has roots in the South and is rural in Nature (i.e., blues, folk tales, and the street culture styles of the rapper, the sounder, and the signifier).

Used in both the sacred and the secular styles of the black folk oral tradition productions is the call and response pattern which is found in the speech and the musical forms. The call occurs when the speaker makes a statement or the leader sings either the first line or the first word of a song. The response takes place when the speaker expects the listener to answer back or when the chorus of singers finish the line of the song or repeat what the reader has said. The interplay between the two continues throughout the production of the work--with a statement and then with a reaction to the statement.

In order for English composition teachers to more fully understand how they can use black American Folk oral materials in their classes (which will be presented later), a brief description of each of the types of black American folk oral types and the verbal and rhetorical strategies will follow.

The black folk tales sprang from a basically oral tradition and they are bascially animal tales. Some of these tales were written by known authors who later used the same original features as the original black folk tales. These features are the use of irony, boasting, symbolism, and hyperbole with the unique treatment of story-telling and

narrative elements. Black folk tales are about the slave known as John/who depicted a slave (John) in contest with the master; other Cycle black folk tales are superstition and supernatural ghost stories, witch-riding stories, voodoo tales, preacher and, "hant" tales

The black folk sermons in black dialect were first developed in the 17th century. These are rich in Biblical images, poetic language (i.e., metaphor and similes), rhythmical patterns, emotional appeal, often skillful narrative development, and the use of idiomatic expressions with the language of the Bible. They blend the common place experience with some historical actions and are characterized by allusions and symbolism.

During the American colonial period and throughout the continuing days of American Negro slavery, black people produced the following types of anonymous poetry which made up the following types of anonymous black folk-song types: ballads, spirituals, non-religious or secular songs, and the blues. These constitute the black American's authentic contribution to American culture. They also show black Americans' deep emotional and rhythmical endowments, their sufferings, humor, faith, protest and endurance. These folk-song types of literature with their unique possession of outstandingly oral poetry exhibit spontaneous rhythmic patterns and ironical and metaphorical overtones.. The African influences of the song types are possessed of the following African musical features: dominance of percussion, polymeter, off-beat phrases of melodic accents and overlapping of the call and response patterns.

As black folk oral literature, the black ballads are narrative poems which sprang from the life of black American people and they were adaptable for recitation and singing. The subjects of the black ballads are black heroes who performed unusual acts and were presented as epic figures (e.g., "Frankie and Johnny," "Railroad Bill," "John Henry," "Casey Jones," and "Stackolee"). They were and still are being transmitted and changed by word of mouth and they most often record tragedies in the lives of black people.

The anonymous black American spirituals comprise one of the most realistic and most beautiful forms in black folk oral tradition (e.g., "Steal Away to Jesus," "Deep River," "Go Down, Moses," and "Nobody Knows De Trouble I See"). The themes of these black spirituals which were mostly developed during slavery and on plantations voice a note of protest, deep religious conviction and expression of the life of Jesus and other outstanding Biblical figures.in an accepted religious and lyrical form. These spirituals bring the Christian Bible alive in vivid symbolism, images, figurative language, black dialect and rhythm. These spirituals also revealed the slave's thoughts on plantation life, gave his faith in his religion, his desire for freedom from sin and his desire to fly to freedom.

Most of the black spirituals showed the slave's condition which he compared to that of the Israelities. To him and in a code-like manner, Pharaoh represented the master-class and Canaan became a land of freedom (which was in many cases, Canada or the North). In their double or dual meanings, a code-like vocabulary, irony and symbols, the slaves saw -

Heaven as a place where there was a better life after death and where there was an absence of the harsh conditions of earthly lives in slavery. The black spirituals inevitably had two meanings for the slave as a part of the code language they used--a worldly one (very often emphasizing the theme of flight, escape or freedom) and a spiritual one which was usually the only meaning the master was able to see. Black dialect again served as the mode of expression for this form of black folk literature.

From the point of view of art, the black non-religious or secular songs are as outstanding as the spirituals in terms of their rich form and vivid expression. These songs through poetry showed black people's wit, humor, irony, and wisdom and were nursery rhymes, plays, dance and love-making songs, work songs, and very often songs of ironic protest.

The black American blues were also an anonymous type of black folk poetry and might be considered as a unique form of the black secular song. Although they have been refined since the days of slavery, these songs originated in that era. These poetic songs dealt with grief, self-pity, hard times, variety of bad luck, often unrequited love and despair. In contrast to the spirituals which were intended for group singing, the blues are sung by a single singer. They are mocking, sarcastic, ironic, tragic-comic, tragic, dramatic and curious.

Afro-American jokes are not quite as unique a literary representation of black cultural ancestry as are the other forms of the black folk oral literary tradition. Black jokes are terse, short, but witty tales which depend upon a punchline conclusion for comical effect. In the story (or joke) a represented verse or song usually gives humorous and witty conclusions for emotional effect. Black dialect is used as the mode of expression for the Afro-American jokes.

In his "The Logic of Non-standard English" William Labov recognizes abilities (i.e., verbality, verbosity, grammaticality, and logic) that black users of a non-standard dialect possess.[2] Black culture and black lifestyles encourage and almost demand the use of fluency and verbal strategies that are not the same kinds of rhetorical strategies and dialect that the mainstream culture uses and thrives upon. The verbal and rhetorical strategies that have been produced and used by blacks who are especially endowed with great verbal ability are rapping, running it down, jiving, shucking, copping a plea, sounding and signifying. These strategies can be effectively used in the English composition classroom for motiviational and other instructional purposes, for these strategies emphasize rhetoric and the art of persuasion through the skillful use of language.

The following black (mainly urban) ghetto verbal strategies are parts of a black oral tradition and culture that demand the use of a secret code of the (black) street culture and its in-group members as well as an exclusive type of black ghetto idiom;

Rapping is one of the most widely used of all the black verbal strategies. It is often referred to as a form of conversation that is lively, interesting, and fluent. Rapping may also be descriptive of a narrative or a colorful rundown of a past event. Most of the time rapping is a sales-type of persuasion with a lively personal style that thrives upon control and manipulation of someone in order to make him do or give up something.

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[2] Willima Labov, "The Logic of Non-standard English," Florida FL Reporter (Spring-Summer 1969): 66-74.

Running it down is a verbal instrument which involves giving (or requesting) information, advice, clarification, or addition to some information already presented. It is a way of giving explanation or repetition, and it comes as a request that hinges upon surprise or disbelief on the part of the listener to understand what has already been said. Style and personality are at the center of this strategy.

Jiving often refers to communication (used by the audience or the listener) which "puts someone on" or which is difficult for someone to believe (i.e., listener gives a belief that the speaker might not be reliable or honest). Abrahams and Geneva Gay call jiving a form of rejection which the listener tells "the speaker he is saying things that both he and his audience recognize as being void of real meaning, impractical and impossible to realize."[3] Often the term jiving is used in the sense of "shucking and jiving" or "all that jive," or "off the wall stuff."

Shucking has a particular meaning when used by blacks in referring to blacks or in referring to whites. Roger Abrahams and Geneva Gay believe that many shuckers are "Uncle Toms" and "Aunt Janes" or those who "when confronted with a compromising and dangerous situation (whether the danger is physical or emotional)" very often do "What is expected of (them)" by portraying "Simple-mindedness, pleading, and submission, and even confession of guilt along with oaths and penance."[4] Shucking

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[3] Roger D. Abrahams and Geneva Gay, "Talking Black in the Classroom," in Language and Cultural Diversity in American Education, eds. Roger D. Abrahams and Rudolph C. Troike (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), p. 203.

[4] Ibid.

is a defensive verbal strategy, but when one is shucking in order to "whup the Game," he is using the offensive strategy as a guise designed to manipulate someone to make him give up something or feel or act a particular way. Many blacks are more desirous than ever to use offensive strategies to express their feelings of pride and self-assertion. When blacks use shucking on other blacks, they use appropriate folk talk and gestures that give a false impression that often "has play overtones in which the person being 'put on' is aware of the attempts being made and goes along with it for enjoyment or in appreciation of the style."[5]

Copping a plea, like shucking and jiving, emphasizes the ability to get out of a situation through compromise. However, copping a plea is a more direct verbal strategy in which one recognizes the superiority of someone else and, hence, asks or begs for mercy, pity, or sympathy which Thomas Kochman calls "total loss of face" or "loss of status among one's peers."[6] One uses copping a plea when he is fearful or insecure and when he wants to show respect for or fear of someone who is more powerful or superior.

Sounding has as its aim to insult someone in varying ways and degrees from the word game used to test attitude and disposition, to friendly and petulant quarreling, or to words used to start a physical fight. The sound may be a simple challenge. The effectiveness of the sound is measured by the quickness of the answer or response that is received in reply to it, or by its unexpected or quick-willed nature.

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[5] Thomas Kochman, "'Rapping' in the Black Ghetto," Transaction, February 1969, p.31.

[6] Ibid.

If it takes the contender a long time to respond to the sound, then the sound is said to be good or effective. Other terms that refer to sounding are "coming down hard" or being "foul" or "cold." The aim of sounding is to take status from an opponent through the use of verbal power by making the opponent feel he must get his status by sounding back--either on the speaker or other group members he is encountering. Group presence is important to the game (very often helpful in preventing a physical fight).

Signifying is a verbal strategy that is referred to in some places as sounding or insulting someone. It involves boasting, implying, begging, or inciting someone through the use of gestures or verbal play. Signifying refers to talking with great innuendo, to carp, needle and lie, and to cajole. It means the ability to talk around the subject never quite coming to the point. It also means making fun of a person or a situation. It is signifying to stir up fights between friends by telling stories.

The black verbal and rhetorical strategies, therefore, serve definite needs and functions in the black American community--needs that teachers and other educators should become aware of and familiar with if they are to do adequate jobs in the classroom. When properly applied, these same black verbal and rhetorical strategies can also be effectivly used in the English composition classroom for both motivational and instructional purposes.

The black American folk oral tradition types of literature and the black verbal and rhetorical strategies may be used as curriculum motivational and instructional tools in the English composition classroom because of their outstanding appeals. Elements of the black American folk oral tradition can be useful for instruction in the general (Freshman and Sophomore) English composition classes, in the introduction to literature classes or in other advanced English composition classes to generate discussions, to provide information for composition topics, and for grammar and dialect code-switching (linguistic) exercises and dialogues.

Rhetoric (i.e., the art of persuasion both oral and written) and the elements of English composition may be presented in the English composition classroom by the use of elements of the black oral folk tradition. Elements of the black folk oral types (i.e., ballads, folk tales, blues, spirituals, etc.) that are Narrative in nature may be used to teach Narration (time order) and those that are Descriptive in nature to teach Description (spatial order or appearances). The literary themes or the significances of the folk literary types and works which have elements of the black American experience and are also important elements that possess unique qualities of the universal human condition of all mankind may be utilized as topics for Expository and Augumentative compositions.

Students may examine the literary and the rhetorical styles and structures of the black folk sermons and their handling of the ethical, rational, and the emotional appeals of compositions. The students may produce written and oral compositions that emphasize the rhetorical and the Argumentative elements and appeals by presenting the important features, styles, and themes or significances, delivery , and the message of the orginal black sermons analyzed in or outside the class.

Students may Compare and/or Contrast the various black folk oral types and the verbal and rhetorical strategies or they may Analyze them as written and oral assignments. Lessons that deal with the use of Factual Details in compositions , with chronological order, Examples and/or Illustrations, Definition, Paraphasing, Summarization, and/Cause and/or Effect may be presented by dealing with elements of the black folk literary types especially the black folk-song types and the black sermons along with the use or rapping and running it down. However, composition or essay topics may simply generate from a discussion of the historical, philosophical, sociological, religious, entertainment, and psychological aspects of the black American experience. Students may give the functions of, purposes of, usages of,and the effectivenesses of each of the black verbal and rhetorical strategies (e.g. shucking, jiving,signifying and sounding,etc.) as means of classroom discussions and as a basis for oral and written Argumentive compositions or essays. The black American dialect may be used to practive the use of the black verbal and rhetorical strategies for role-playing and for code-switching or shifting to Standard American English.

For motivational purposes before class discussions and oral and written assignments are done, students may examine the use of black folk oral elements, features, types, black dialect and the black verbal and rhetorical strategies found in commericals and advertisements on television, in magazines and in newspapers and also in the movies and television and radio shows. Students may examine black folk elements used by black disk jockeys and comedians. A journal of out of class contacts with aspects of the black folk tradition (concerts, movies, readings, conversasations with friends and relatives, church services, etc.) may be kept by the students in the English composition class.

Students may examine examples of the black folk oral tradition types of literature in the English composition class. This examination can be helpful in the teaching of rhetoric in general or in the teaching of (introductory) literature with the ultimate aim of getting the students to produce oral and written compositions or essays which express, emphasize and analyze the univeral appeals of irony, repetition, rhythm, theme, plot, tone, conflict, characterization, point of view, narrative style, narrative realism, wit, didacticism, symbolism, allegory, myth, ritual, humor, superstition, narrative structure, expressions of practical and homely wisdom and philosophy, satire, figurative language, poetic devices and poetic structural patterns such as the narrative, image and the idea patterns.

The teacher can select the type of black folk oral literature which is appropriate for his class' handling of any of these above named devices found in appropriate examples of black folk tradition literature. Students may discuss the original usage of a particular folk oral literary type and then present in composition or essay form the use of the same types of works in America today. For motivational purposes the students may have oral and written compositions in the form of skits or individual oral readings of particular types of black folk oral literature along with the black verbal and rhetorical strategies. Poetry can be taught by using the examples of the features of black folk-song types; oral and written compositions may be based upon this presentation of the poetical elements and aspects found in the black folk-song types. Poetry may also be discussed and taught by using poems written by known black American writers who used elements of the black folk oral tradition in their literary works.

For any class which has as its ultimate aim getting students to produce unified and coherent oral or written compositions or essays many motivational activities may be done before the students compose. Black folk-song types of literature such as spirituals, blues, work songs, songs of irony, ballads, and secular songs may be interpreted on different levels such as the black or the white or the spiritual or the worldly levels. The teacher may play recordings of folk-song types by outstanding musicians or reading-poet artists, and this can lead into a student discussion of the blends of the music (African and Afro-American derivation) and other words of the folk-song types. Some students may also individually or collectively perform musical compositions of the folk-song types for the class as means of classroom motivation. Students may listen to recordings or tapes of black American folk tales, black sermons, and black jokes by anonymous and known writers. This activity may be followed by a group or individual discussion of the work and then the writing or speaking assignment.

In the literature class which has as its ultimate aim the production of student compositions, the students may use black folk tales by anonymous and known authors for the discussion of the elements of Fiction. Written and/or oral assignments (group and individual) may generate from class discussions of the elements of Fiction (style and theme) found in the black folk literary works. Students may write creative examples of the various black folk oral tradition types as well as the verbal and rhetorical strategies. Students may base compositions upon the dual nature and the irony of particular types of black folk literature or black verbal and rhetorical strategies. Written and oral essay topics may come from discussions of the content of the original black folk oral forms in their historical perspective or in application of them to present day life experiences.

Black folk tales may be read and then re-told in Standard English; the lessons or the themes gained from the telling of them may be discussed and used as sources for topics of oral and written assignments. The short story may be talked about and taught by using elements of the black folk tales; the novel may be taught by using black American novels or short story collections written by known black American writers who extensively used elements of the black folk oral tradition in their literary works. Drama may be taught by using elements of the black folk-song types and the black folk tales as well as the black folk jokes through student written and class-group dramatizations of the black folk tradition types. Discussions and essays may be drawn from these dramatizations.

Students may examine and discuss the black American dialect found in black folk-song types, black folk tradition sermons, and Afro-American jokes. They may use these black folk forms for code-switching or shifting exercises into Standard American English.

The black American folk oral tradition of literature and the black verbal and rhetorical strategies express black American reality and show a definite mastery of literary and rhetorical techniques and linguistic expression in a form that makes them effective as utilitarian tools for all peoples in the community as a part of the Black Aesthetic and in the English composition classroom for motivational and instructional purposes and tools.

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